

A FUSION OF CULTURES AND THE RISE OF GYNAECOLOGY IN THE HELLENISTIC WORLD

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the stylization and content of the statuette of a childbirth scene, and the impact of Hellenistic medicine on the statuette. However, there has been no research published before about this statuette. This paper focuses on Cypriot culture from the Chalcolithic period until the Hellenistic period, and the increasing popularity of using portraiture to connect oneself to power in Ptolemaic culture. Also, this paper will examine the rise of gynaecology and recognition of midwifery in the Hellenistic period due to the change of political structures, because it is likely that it caused the statuette to be portrayed realistically. This paper aims to explore how the impact of the fusion between the Cypriot and Ptolemaic cultures resulted in an individualized childbirth scene, as well as how the rise of gynaecology and midwifery affected the realism of the statuette.

Ancient Cyprus is known to have had a distinct culture and artistic style separate from the Greek or Near Eastern cultures, even throughout the rule of the Achaemenids until 333 BCE.¹ An aspect of ancient Cypriot culture from the Chalcolithic to the Archaic period was its votive statuettes to one or many goddesses, which displayed themes of fertility.² However, Alexander the Great's defeat of the Persians in 333 BCE began the increase of influence of Greek culture in Cyprus.³ After the *diadochi*, the Ptolemies ruled Cyprus from 312 BCE until the Romans acquired it in 58 BCE.⁴ Material culture in Cyprus was impacted as a result of the change in the social and political structures.⁵ Additionally, Ptolemaic Egypt

¹Papantoniou, "Cypriot Autonomous Polities," 169.

²Swiny, "Prehistoric Cyprus: A Current Perspective," 185.

³Papantoniou, 170.

⁴Papantoniou, 170.

⁵Papantoniou, 190.

influenced the Hellenistic world through its research in medicine, specifically its increased interest in women, gynaecology and childbirth.⁶ Thus, in Ptolemaic Cyprus there was a change in art as a result of the political changes and the rise of Hellenistic medicine.

A limestone statuette of a childbirth scene is currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (Figure 1).⁷ The subject of the statuette is a pregnant woman after she has given birth, reclining on a small bed. At both ends of the woman are aids, perhaps midwives, who have helped her give birth. The pregnant woman's labour is likely recent because of her swollen belly and exposed breasts. The aid standing on the right side of the woman is still supporting her and the aid on the left side is kneeling between the pregnant woman's legs. The left side aid may be a midwife because she is holding an object in her arms, which is likely the newborn baby. The statuette's depiction of a childbirth scene with the aids is realistic because it illustrates the vigour and recentness of labour.

The statuette was found by Luigi Palma di Cesnola in 1870 at the Sanctuary of Golgoi-Ayios Photios, in the region of Athienou in Cyprus.⁸ The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased the collection from Cesnola in 1874-1876,⁹ and the museum dated the statuette to have been made between 310-30 BCE. The Sanctuary of Golgoi-Ayios Photios was a sanctuary for Apollo during the Hellenistic period; however, there were votive statues found that were dedicated to female goddesses.¹⁰ The statuette was likely made as a votive offering in thanks for a successful birth because of the placement of the scene immediately after the birth, in which the mother and child are both shown. The statuette may have also been a votive offering because it was found at a sanctuary, with multiple other votive offerings on the site. These other votives were of males, females, children, and notably *kourotrophoi*, which depict seated women holding children, suggesting that there was a custom to dedicate votives pertaining to fertility and rites of passage at the sanctuary.¹¹

To determine the reason for which the statuette is presented, we have to consider two cultural contexts: Hellenistic Ptolemaic culture and traditional Cypriot culture. Archaeologists have found several votive figurines in Cyprus from the Chalcolithic period which depict women in labour,¹² as well as figurines that depict women with swollen bellies, who may have been pregnant.¹³ Additionally, archaeologists have

⁶Grant, *From Alexander to Cleopatra*, 155.

⁷"Limestone Statuette of a Childbirth Scene," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, sculpture.

⁸Hermery and Mertens, *The Cesnola Collection of Cypriot Art*, 14.

⁹Hermery and Mertens, 13.

¹⁰Hermery and Mertens, 18.

¹¹Hermery and Mertens, 176.

¹²Swiny, 185.

¹³Bolger, "Figurines, Fertility, and the Emergence," 368.

found throughout Cyprus inscriptions to a “Great Mother” from the bronze age until the Classical period.¹⁴ The figurines and the inscriptions about a female goddess, depicting themes of fertility and motherhood, suggests ancient Cypriot people prominently worshipped fertility goddesses from the Chalcolithic period until the Classical period. Then, due to exposure to Archaic and Classical Greek culture in the 6th century BCE, Cypriot culture began to be influenced by Greek culture.¹⁵ During this period, there is evidence of the first epigraphic record of the Greek gods on Cyprus, which implies that the worship of them began at this time.¹⁶ This contact with Greek religion caused the fertility goddesses of Cyprus to be syncretized with Aphrodite.¹⁷ Goddesses of fertility and sexuality were of immense importance to traditional Cypriot culture, and this cultural tradition carried on into the Classical period, despite Greek prominence.

When the Ptolemies ruled Cyprus, Hellenistic culture became dominant on the island. Three new cities were established in Cyprus by the Ptolemies, and several sanctuaries were discontinued due to political strife.¹⁸ Also, because of the change in political structure at Cyprus, why and how the Cypriot people made dedications at the sanctuaries was affected. There was an increased importance in private commissions of votive statues, likely because of the influence of the new kingdom’s political structure, which used dedications of statues and monuments to demonstrate personal power.¹⁹ To do this, personalized features were depicted on Ptolemaic votive figurines to directly connect the devotee to power.²⁰ These new attitudes towards portraiture and material culture affected how people made dedications and votaries; rather than the dedication symbolizing the worshipper, the dedication was made to explicitly depict the worshipper through personalized features. These Hellenistic votary figurines adhered to the Ptolemaic models of portraiture, but still upheld Cypriot traditional style.²¹ Also, the interest in individualized material culture reflects an increasing fixation with personal and general experience in the Hellenistic world.²² Therefore, material objects in Ptolemaic culture were in fact personal, as well as realistic in their style in order to convey individualized features.

This childbirth statuette looks the way it does due to the influence of two cultural contexts, the traditional Cypriot and Ptolemaic cultures. The statuette’s content matter was influenced by the traditional Cypriot culture because of its depiction of

¹⁴Young, “The Cypriot Aphrodite Cult,” 23.

¹⁵Papantoniou, “Cypriot,” 170.

¹⁶Papantoniou, “Cypriot,” 170.

¹⁷Papantoniou, “Cyprus from Basileis to Strategos,” 46.

¹⁸Papantoniou, “Cyprus,” 43-46.

¹⁹Smith and Plantzos, *Companion to Greek Art*, 123.

²⁰Papantoniou, “Cypriot,” 190.

²¹Papantoniou, “Cyprus,” 45.

²²Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*, 143.

a childbirth scene. It has been established that fertility and labour were important aspects of traditional Cypriot culture, so the decision to display an explicit childbirth for a votary suggests a revival of Cypriot traditions, despite the change in cultural and political structure. From the Ptolemaic culture, is its vividness, and personal experience of the subject. Additionally, the statuette's adherence to the Ptolemaic style and Cypriot culture suggests that the devotee was adapting to Ptolemaic rule within a Cypriot framework.²³ Thus, the statuette reflects the influence of two cultures, and likely depicts a compromise between the two cultures in the new political structure.

The statuette of a childbirth scene is Hellenistic not only because of its fusion of two cultures, but also because it represents the increased importance of research in the Hellenistic period. The statuette's vivid depiction of a childbirth scene corresponds with the specialization in women's health and childbirth, as well as the rising recognition of female medicinal figures during the Hellenistic period.

The practice of medicine during the Classical period was done primarily within religious contexts, such as in healing cults, especially at the shrine of Asclepius in Cos.²⁴ A famous Greek physician during the Classical period was Hippocrates of Cos, who is known for his *Hippocratic Corpus*. The *Hippocratic Corpus* consists of medical treatises that all vary in style and content, suggesting that they could have been written by several authors between the fifth and first centuries BCE, and were then compiled by the tenth century CE.²⁵ During the Classical period medical understanding was more theoretical than scientific.²⁶ The Hippocratic doctrines from this period that discuss women's health are exemplary of this, due to the amount of inaccuracy within them. For example, the theoretical disease of hysteria proposes that the womb is an animal, and it often wanders around women's bodies.²⁷

In the Hippocratic doctrine, *The Diseases of Women*, the doctor never examines nor has any personal experience with the female patient, and instead a female assistant examines the patient or the patient examines herself.²⁸ A reason for the doctor's uninvolved approach may be that the Hippocratic doctrines claim that because women did not suffer the same diseases as men, they must not be treated or cared for like men.²⁹ Additionally, there is little written about childbirth within the Hippocratic doctrines, which may be because men were not involved in the process

²³Papantoniou, "Cyprus," 45.

²⁴Grant, 155.

²⁵Archer, Fischler and Wike, *Women in Ancient Societies*, 102.

²⁶Dillon and James, *Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, 124.

²⁷Dillon and James, 113.

²⁸Dillon and James, 109.

²⁹Dillon and James, 106.

of labour.³⁰ Thus, how the Hippocratic Corpus viewed and dealt with women suggests that during the Classical period there was a lack of interest in discovering how the female body worked in an accurate and involved approach.

In the Hellenistic period there was a shift in scholars' approach to medicine due to the accessibility of new sources and evidence, because of the political changes of the kingdom state. The kings of the early Hellenistic period invested more money into research and knowledge, especially in Ptolemaic Alexandria, which contained the Library and Museum of Alexandria.³¹ The Ptolemies invested in research and information to enhance the prestige of their kingdom, and aimed to rival other Hellenistic kingdoms, as well as Athens.³² In order to compete with other kingdoms, they supplied their researchers with criminals so they could perform vivisection and dissection to further their information on anatomy.³³ The Ptolemies also acquired the Hippocratic library of Cos, and had it moved to Alexandria, presumably to enhance their library's fame.³⁴ This contrasts from the Classical period because city states did not invest in research, which Plato notably complained about.³⁵ However, although the Hippocratic doctrines were still being written during this period, this paper focuses on the rise of physicians in the Hellenistic period who practiced outside of the Hippocratic tradition. Ptolemaic Alexandria had many noteworthy physicians, such as Erasistratus of Ceos and Herophilus of Chalcedon, both of whom were prominent in the third century BCE.³⁶ Due to the rise in opportunities offered to physicians at Alexandria, there were advances in their study of medicine and anatomy because they could base their knowledge on observation rather than theory. It is probable that their research had impacted Hellenistic culture, which includes Ptolemaic Cyprus. There are inscriptions that convey that there were cults to Asclepius and Hygieia at Cyprus, which may have disseminated medical information.³⁷ Thus, it is likely that the rise in medical knowledge at Alexandria had influenced Cyprus, especially because it had established medical cults.

The change in medical approach in the Hellenistic period also caused an increased curiosity in women's health and medicine, which contrasts from the Classical period. An explanation for this increase is the general interest in human anatomy, which was more accurate and involved. The main text from this period that dealt with women's health was Herophilus' treatise on midwifery, in which he attempted

³⁰Rhodes, *A Short History of Clinical Midwifery*, 3.

³¹Grant, 151.

³²Longrigg, "Anatomy in Alexandria," 455.

³³Longrigg, 457.

³⁴Rhodes, 6.

³⁵Grant, 151.

³⁶Longrigg, 455.

³⁷Papantoniou, "Cyprus," 48.

to debunk former theories about the uterus, but this has since been lost.³⁸ Yet, are there only fragments of this treatise from other authors, predominantly Soranus of Ephesus. Although Soranus lived in the second century CE during the Roman period, he studied medicine in Alexandria and wrote about and referenced Hellenistic scholars.³⁹ Soranus is often referred as the first gynaecologist in known history because of his accuracy and engaged approach towards women's health.⁴⁰ Soranus wrote a treatise, *Gynecology*, and frequently referenced Herophilus, such as when he confirmed Herophilus' conclusion that ovaries are similar to testes.⁴¹ In his treatise, he disagrees with the notion that the womb is an animal and that it wanders within the female body, which greatly differs from previous male assumptions about the female body.⁴² Additionally, he often criticized other scholars for their ideas about female anatomy. There is also evidence within his treatise that suggests that he performed vaginal examinations and that he was involved in assisting with childbirth.⁴³ This implies that physicians were more involved in women's health rather than only theorizing about it, which is significant because women were beginning to be treated for their health more accurately. Additionally, because Hellenistic physicians began to treat women, this may have affected how Hellenistic society perceived women's health, and thus likely affected the realism of the statuette.

There was a rise in legendary and historical professional medicinal women in the fourth century BCE, which suggests that there was a rise in recognition of women in medicinal roles compared to the Classical period. It is likely that there were midwives and medicine women prior to this period, but there are no surviving records about them.⁴⁴ A known legendary figure from the Hellenistic period was Agnodice of Athens, who studied under Herophilus, and she is often described as the first female physician.⁴⁵ Historically, Aspasia of Athens from the fourth century BCE wrote treatises on gynaecology and possibly provided better care for her patients than Soranus.⁴⁶ Additionally, Flavius Aetius from the fourth century CE quoted her more than Soranus when he discussed gynaecology, which suggests that she may have had more authority on the subject than him.⁴⁷ The rise in legendary and historical female medicinal figures suggests that female physicians and midwives had more recognition in the Hellenistic period compared to the Classical period. Thus, the increased recognition of women in medicinal roles may have

³⁸Most, "Callimachus and Herophilus," 193.

³⁹Rhodes, 6.

⁴⁰Rhodes, 6.

⁴¹Soranus, *Gynecology*, I.12.

⁴²Soranus, I.6-11.

⁴³Rhodes, 6.

⁴⁴Dillon and James, 122.

⁴⁵Grant, 201.

⁴⁶Dillon and James, 123.

⁴⁷Dillon and James, 123.

influenced the statuette's depiction of the two aids in the childbirth scene, who likely were midwives or physicians.

The limestone statuette of a childbirth scene was made and dedicated in Cyprus during a period of drastic political change, that resulted in the altering of dynamics in society, material culture and medicine. It also affected the social conduct between the Cypriot and Ptolemaic cultures, which influenced material objects and often made them a mixture of both cultures. Additionally, the change in political structure impacted research in medicine, and also caused physicians to value involved research. This led to male physicians acknowledging women in medicinal professions because of their skill and experience pertaining to gynaecology. This suggests that the development in medicine and acknowledgement of midwifery caused the statuette to be portrayed more realistically. Thus, this statuette is important for understanding the shifting dynamics of the Hellenistic period because of its influence from midwifery and women's health, as well as the fusion of cultures.

FIGURES



Figure 1: "Limestone statuette of a childbirth scene." 310 B.C.E-30 B.C.E
H. 16.5 cm; W. 25.1 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Accession no. 74.51.2698
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/242249>

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